EQUITY BEFORE "EQUITY": CATALYTIC MENTORING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR AN OPENLY GAY WRITING CENTER TUTOR

Joseph Janangelo
Loyola University Chicago
jjanang@luc.edu

This essay is inspired by two of the questions from the editors' CFP:

1. "What is the lived experience around graduate writing, especially for students from underserved populations?"
2. "What kinds of support do 'graduate student writers' from underserved populations need and want?"

I confess to having put the words "graduate student writers" in scare quotes. That's because I am writing about my own experiences as an openly gay graduate student who was, at times, under- and over-served by the academy.

In this text, I discuss my work and professional identity formation as a writing center consultant at New York University (NYU) from 1986 to 1988. I will discuss how, at that particular urban writing center directed by Professor Lil Brannon, there was equity—"the quality of being fair and impartial" (Dictionary.com)—for this gay, out graduate student before the concept of "equity" was valued and long before it gained the compelling currency it holds in contemporary academe. I hope to show what the experience taught me and how it signified a transformation in my understanding of what it could mean to tutor other students and study student writing.

This essay will be pointillist in approach. It will light on brief narratives of key events and move to a discussion of how these events influenced my work and sense of professional self. The following preamble is intended to offer some context for my early intellectual and professional development, as I experienced it.

Lived Experience

Before graduate school, I didn't especially love my lived experience; at least as I lived it. At an undergraduate college, I was the dutiful, quiet student who racked up dozens of A's on "papers." At least at that school, the success script was simple: you read the books, underlined "key" passages, went to class (on time), took notes on the lecture, and answered questions when called upon to do so. At the end of each semester, you were done. In terms of writing advice, there was none. In terms of pedagogy, I suppose we were somehow taught to perform close readings of literary texts, though that particular goal and strategy went unmentioned.

After graduation, I attended graduate school at NYU to earn a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. My understanding of my scholarly writing and pedagogical purpose changed somewhat there in Greenwich Village. I say "somewhat" because, while the work threshold was higher (with faculty and students repeating the "publish or perish"), the familiar close reading approach was still in play.

Looking back, I remember two changes. I call the first one, "edge." Faculty were not reticent about aggressively telling students where they and their work fell short. Here is one comment I remember: *"Votre tete est un tamis."* My rough translation: "Your head is a sieve." That was a comment a teacher directed to my peer during class. Here is another comment: "You obviously went to a second-rate school." That comment was directed at me, by a closeted gay faculty member, during a conference.

I confess to not seeing such comments as all bad because I imagined faculty imagined themselves micro-aggressing and, to my mind, throwing shade in the service of a) intellectual rigor and b) toughening us up. There was always a *soupçon* (trace) of crazy and a side order of amusement along the way. For example, I was amused when a faculty member cheerfully advised us during her class "theory" lecture that, "If you want your children to be well-educated, get them a French governess." That unabashed elitism rang campy, removed from my life experience, and very straight. Remember: this was before most gay people were thought to be legally worthy of, much less legally eligible for, parenthood.

Teachers weren't always cheerful. When one of my peers answered a question wrong, that same faculty member berated him in front of class, saying: "If you haven't read the book, I don't know why you bothered to come to class!" Exhortation seemed to be pedagogical tool as she described her grading policy for our seminar papers: "From what you write, I will know if you have read." Was it too textbook camp of me to

have admired the "shade" while acknowledging the threat?

Beyond that, I recall no instruction in writing. Publishing was something that faculty members did. My takeaway was that if you could not write publishable seminar papers on your own, there were two reasons. Either you had not paid enough attention in class and/or you were not intellectually suited to succeed in graduate school.

For added value and devaluation, there was the matter of sexuality. From first grade through college, I was marked as gay and that seemed to be everyone's business, purview, and problem. In fact, my Shakespeare teacher wrote me a letter of recommendation to graduate school in which she praised Joe Janangelo's "fey devotion to his work." According to *Urban Dictionary*, fey means "fairly gay, as applied to a heterosexual male with homosexual stereotypical traits." One of *Dictionary's* entries notes that "Fey means gay unless it is on your license plate."

That fey devotion was tested in a graduate class when a faculty member announced why she refused to review a work about the playwright Jean Genet because, "He is a thief and a homosexual." While I couldn't aspire to be a playwright, at least I wasn't a thief. There was another microaggression that I found impactful. At the department holiday party, a drunken faculty member was ranting about the damage Roland Barthes had done to the study of literature. "I'm glad he's dead," she intoned.

So there I was, in Greenwich Village, with a teacher who hated gays, thieves, and theorists.

My survival strategy then was, perhaps not unlike other gay people with few healthy role models or advocates, to keep listening and learning. Eventually, I was asked to work as a teaching assistant for a "Literature and Art" class. I was tasked with responding to student writing. The only things I knew at that point were a) the instructor was infuriated by students' errors, b) I did not know how to to help students improve their writing, and c) shaming student writers while marking them down—a departmental specialty—did not seem not a responsible way to teach. By happenstance, I saw a flyer on a wall advertising a workshop devoted to "Strategies for Responding to Student Texts." The event was to be hosted by something called "the writing center," and I felt called to attend. It, the workshop and ensuing conversations, was catalytic.

POC

In business terminology, "point of contact (POC) or single point of contact (SPOC) is a person or a department serving as the coordinator or focal point of information concerning an activity or program." According to that definition, "A POC is used in many cases where information is time-sensitive and accuracy is important."

The POC to whom I refer was Professor Lil Brannon, the Director of the Writing Center and co-founding editor of The Writing Center Journal. Of course I didn't know that she co-founded the journal and would not have understood what that meant to the study of writing, at the time. What did dawn on me during the workshop was that Lil, as she asked me to call her, was leading a very different, and new to me, kind of intellectual conversation.

For one thing, Lil discussed "students" with important and challenging work to do. She neither blamed nor shamed students for making grammatical and punctuation errors. While the "Literature and Art" professor (a good person), wanted his students to "stop doing that" (e.g. making errors), Lil offered a calm, learned, and sensitive discussion of why students might be doing "that," that particular way.

Lil pointed out that most student writers must juggle several intellectual tasks at once to compose an essay. She also mentioned the logic of error, with a nod to a scholar named Muriel Harris. Lil's respect for students, and the idea that errors had logic and patterns, made so much sense—seemed so grounded in the realities of what writers do—that I wanted to learn more.

At the end of the workshop, Lil mentioned that she would be teaching a course called "History of Rhetorical Theory." Although I had completed my coursework, I asked her if could audit, and she said yes. In that class, we read Michael Polyani, Jacques Monod, and Mikhail Bakhtin and applied their ideas to the study and practice of teaching composition. That changed three things for me: 1) there was a faculty member who valued theory, 2) there were more scholarly approaches than close critical reading, and 3) theoretical arguments could and should be applied to the teaching of writing.

At the end of the semester, Lil asked if I would like to work in the writing center, and I said yes, if I could get more training.

Tutor Training as Professional and Pedagogical Development

The next semester, I enrolled in Lil's "Individualized Instruction" course. There we read work by writing center and composition scholars. I remember being impressed by Winston Weathers's "Alternative Grammars of Style" and Sondra Perl's

concept of experienced writers' "felt sense" that their texts needed work. Important to me was that those scholars removed the shame traces from student errors. They portrayed "students" as valuable people with vexing projects to write.

In the writing center, we had weekly meetings where people reflected on their sessions and we often recorded ourselves in conferences and typed up two pages of a conference talk to be read and scrutinized with our peers. Those transcripts became "texts" which we interpreted in relation to the scholarship we were reading. To some tutors, they were mini "case studies." To others, they were excerpts from a theatrical production. In the latter scenario, writers and tutors became characters pursuing a common problem, with moments of understanding and disconnection.

The biggest lesson was in active listening. Tutorials offered windows into assignment design: it was fascinating to see how a student writer made sense of what was asked of them in a writing assignment. At the time there was no online assignment repository, thus we had to listen carefully and pay attention to each student's narration of what they knew and thought they were supposed to do.

If we paid attention, we learned which aspects of a writing assignment landed and which didn't for students. I loved to listen to students and hear how they were applying their creativity, self-doubts, and concerns to a given writing task. On occasion, we were also made privy to backstory: that a student writer wasn't in class the day the assignment was discussed, had not done the reading, had not been to class in "a while," or hadn't even read the assignment sheet before writing their draft. That backchannel aspect was interesting to this gay tutor because it showed that there was confidential backstory (comprising a secret or two to be withheld from instructors) all around me. In retrospect, I noticed the generosity of spirit Lil modeled: she never asked us to wonder if the students were struggling intellectually because their teachers had crafted poor writing assignments.

Ethics as Professional Development

Lil Brannon did a marvelous job of mentoring our professional development. For example, she invited a very young alumni named "Joe Harris"—author of *A Teaching Subject*—to generously discuss his early-career experiences. For another, she explained that our writing center work was a worthy item for inclusion in our curriculum vitae. Lil explained that we should be careful, though: that we may list ourselves as "Assistant to the Director of the Writing Center," and not as "Assistant Director of the Writing Center."

Lil's actions impressed, and still do impress, me as a mentoring lesson in professionalism. She offered a story point to help us build a curriculum vitae and career with modesty and integrity. She offered mentoring in the service of equity by showing us that being precise and honest means ascribing fair attribution to the work that we and others, actual Assistant Directors of the Writing Centers, do. Yet, I might note that some of my peers said they didn't appreciate that piece of advice because it seemed to diminish their own contributions and might make their CVs less attractive or marketable.

I recall another story point that contested Lil and the writing center's mentoring. During that semester, a faculty member in the Comparative Literature Department issued a campus-wide memo stating that Rhetoric and Composition courses would not count toward my degree and that no Comparative Literature graduate students would ever receive credit for those courses. While I had never requested any credit or transcript recognition of the course I sat in on, it was a pretty shaming moment. I felt guilty for causing that particular spectacle, and wonder still why some academics need to besmirch their junior colleagues and their work.

Yet that particular aggression, however unexpected, was not especially surprising. It bespoke the low regard in which my graduate program directors held writing instruction. Moreover, that memo was written by the same literature scholar who publicly said she rejected Jean Genet's work because he was "a thief and a homosexual." I remember wanting to respond by asking, "What would you have said if he had been a writing center tutor, as well?"

Writing and Publishing Article Number #1

When the semester ended, Lil moved on to a new job. I retrieved my seminar paper and saw that she recommended sending it to *The Writing Center Journal* for consideration. There the editor, Jeanette Harris, did a wonderful job of shepherding this amateur through the scholarly peer review process. Because Lil was beginning a new job, I did not send her any drafts or the reviewers' responses. My perspective was that she had done more than enough for me and that one way to thank mentors is to give them some time to continue on their own journey and, if they choose, to direct their attention and energy toward other people.

That brings me to my thoughts about how I experienced writing center mentoring. For sure, Lil was a stellar Point of Contact. She was also much more than that because she modeled a welcoming, rigorous, and drama-free mentoring disposition. She helped me

see that listening actively to help students improve their writing, reading composition, writing center and literary theory, crafting an attractive and ethical *curriculum vitae*, and writing your first scholarly article is simultaneously very important work and no big deal. In other words, helping people write well and trying to write well ourselves are things we can do without being dramatic or engaging in "a rhetoric of exhortation" (a term Lil used from time to time) or deploying a version of straight privilege that dismisses the work of LGBTI writers and readers.

Conclusion

I wish to conclude by returning to the editors' questions:

"What is the lived experience around graduate writing, especially for students from underserved populations?"

Here is what I think I have learned about "lived experience." For one thing, it can change and evolve. Yet, as new people and ideas come into your work life, there are still people and forces that would, if they could, hold sway to keep turning the clock and world back. You will need to seek new experiences and scout for mentors throughout your life and career. You may find that your mentors are right there on campus, giving a workshop about a topic that is "new" to you.

I believe that, if you are gay, front that fact so that people know who you are from the start. Straight people do that to an infinite degree. There may be no good reason to write as a "thief." Yet there may be many good reasons to write as a gay tutor.

"What kinds of support do graduate student writers from underserved populations need and want?"

My understanding of "support" is that it can emanate from a specific and accomplished mentor. It can also have less to do with any one specific interaction or intense conversation, but with a viral, day-in and day-out modeling of intellect and character, in which a mentor proves that everyone's talents and identities are welcome and valued. Lil Brannon modeled the invaluable, quicksilver quality I call "disposition." She wanted, even way back then, graduate students to succeed while being true to themselves.

There is also, in my mind, a responsibility on the part of those who are mentored. One is to not become too dependent on your mentor or covetous of their time and attention. Just as the best teachers let their students go forward and grow apart from them, I generally recommend not tethering one's mentor to one's career (especially career drama) for years. I am all for individuals letting their mentors go and grow, to live and focus on their own lives. Mentors need equity and time for themselves and their families, too.[1]

As mentioned earlier, for this one gay graduate student, working in a writing center was catalytic. I don't think I ever had a nicer job, but then again memory can sentimentalize experience and embellish it with laurels. Mindful of the adage, 28 years of work experience at one private and one public institution tell me that Lil Brannon and the writing center she designed and stewarded deserve their laurels.

I close with a 1988 writing center flashback. Another tutor, Anita, was upset with a colleague. Through her lit cigarette, she whispered "some people are no damn good." Bereft of a cigarette, I can only whisper that, in remembering Lil's mentoring, some people and places are so darn good—so humane and equitable—that they remain ever important.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the editors, Shannon Madden and Michele Eodice. Thanks also to Lil Brannon, Yola C. Janangelo, and Farrell J. Webb.

Notes

1. Over the past three years, Michele Eodice and I have worked achieve this balance of equity and responsibility when we co-directed the Council of Writing Program's Mentor Match Service. At Michele's astute suggestion, we asked aspiring mentor and mentees to articulate their communicative preferences and deal breakers. Melissa Nicolas now directs the Service, which couldn't be in better hands.

Works Cited

"Equity." *Dictionary.com*. 2016. Web. 1 December 2016. http://www.dictionary.com/browse/equity.

"Fey." *Urban Dictionary*. 2 February 2009. Web. 1 December 2016. http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fey.

"Point of Contact." *Wikipedia*. 21 June 2016. Web. 1 December 2016. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Point_of_contact.